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Bhaikshuki : A Lesser Known Script of Eastern India

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Bhaikshuki is a Brahmi based script which is prevalent among the Buddhist monks of the Eastern India during the age of the Palas of Bihar and Bengal in 10th to 12th century A.D. especially at Uddandpura or Odantapuri (modern Biharsharif in the Nalanda district of Bihar. Only few inscriptions and four manuscripts written in this script have so far been discovered. The alphabet is characterized by the use of arrow head marks usually at the top of the letters and in some letters also at the sides. So it is also known as arrow headed script. This script was first noticed by C.Bendall in 1890 in manuscript found at Nepal. After Bendall various scholars like, L.A. Waddel, G. Buhlar, N.P. Chakravarti, D.C. Sircar, R.D. Banerji etc. worked on the Bhaikshuki inscriptions. Interestingly this script was first referred by Al-Beruni (973-1048 AD) in his account Kitab-ul- Hind. He wrote that Bhaiksuki script used in Udunpur in Purvadesh which is the writing of Buddha(Sachau1910 : 173). Probably he meant to say that it was used by Buddhist monks. Various scholars suggest that the place Udunpur is evidently Uddandapura of inscriptions and Odantapuri of the Tibetan writers and it is identified with the modern Biharsarif. It is found exclusively on Buddhist sculptures and manuscripts. The language used in this script is Prakrit influenced by Sanskrit. It shows the features of Brahmi of 4th – 5th cen. A.D. Bendall and Buhler has the opinion that the script is the immediate offspring of the ancient form of Brahmi retaining south Indian features in some letters and northern characteristics in few (Sircar 1953 :222; Buhler 1959:80) . Direction of writing is left to right. It is also used to write Buddhist texts around 11th – 12th cen. A.D.

Records showing usage of the script mainly appeared in the present day states of Bihar, West Bengal, U.P., M. P. in India. Records have also been located in Tibet, Nepal and Burma.

It has a calligraphic charm coming from the use of a thick nibbed pen with distinct arrow heads upon many letters. It was used around the 11-12th cen. AD in eastern India and parts of Nepal and

Tibet. It is highly calligraphic and aesthetic script. Very few manuscript and attestations are so far available.

At present only few inscriptions and four manuscripts written in Bhaikshuki script are known to exist. Manuscripts written in Bhaikshuki script are *Chandralamkara*, *Abhidharmasamuchchayakarika*, *Manichudajataka* and at least one more unknown Buddhist canonical text.

In the year in 1884, British Indologist Cecil Bendall came across a fragment of a unique manuscript in Kathmandu, Nepal. Due to the form of its calligraphic characters, he described it as "arrow loaded script" and suggested that it might be identical to Bhaikshuki, an Indian script mentioned by the famous Persian writer Al-Biruni back in the 10^{th} cen. AD.

Thirty four leaves of *Chandralamkara* manuscript were purchased by C. Bendall when he made a trip to Nepal in 1884. In 1886 Bendall published his preliminary study of script together with a short description of the manuscript. In 1895 Bruno Liebich analyzed this manuscript and briefly described the text. In 1934 the manuscript was eventually donated to the Cambridge University library. The 34 leaves kept in Cambridge belong to the same manuscript as another bundle of 23 leaves earlier belonging to the private Vajracharya collection in Kathmandu Nepal which were photographed in 1971 by the Institute for Advanced studies in world Religions, U.S.A., while two leaves of the latter set were microfilmed by the Nepal-German manuscript Preservation Project in 1983. Only the latter two are still extant in the Vajracharya collection and remaining leaves have been dispersed or missing. So total 57 leaves of said manuscript available for study. According to Dimitrov it is belong to the Buddhist monastery of Somapura (modern Paharpur, Bangladesh).

Abhidharmasamuchchayakarika and *Munichudajataka* were once kept in the Tibetan monastery of *Gonkhar* and were brought to Italy by Giuseppe Tucci(Tucci 1950:129) in 1948. At present exact place of preservation of the *Manicudajataka* is unknown, and only photographs of the text are available. *Abhidharmasamuchchayakarika* was rediscovered in Tucci's home in 2014 and presently it is kept in National Museum of Oriental Art in Rome. The forth unknown text was found in Tibet and it was recently shown in a Chinese documentary. A project in Arrow headed script was launched in 2004 to study the few surviving documents written in the script. In the first part of project ended in 2007 with the successful completion of the work on manuscript of Sarvarakshita's *Manichudajataka*, a poem written in mixture of Sanskrit and Prakrit. The second part of the project focuses on *Chandralamkara* manuscript. It is unknown commentary on the *Chandravyakarana* the seminal Sanskrit grammar by the Buddhist scholar Chandragamin (5^{th} cen. AD). The *Chandralamkara* was written probably by the unknown Buddhist author. Germany based Dr. Dragomir Dimitrov, Assistance Professor of Indology and Tibitology at the Philips – Universitat Marburg in Germany published his monumental work entitled The Bhaiksuki manuscript of the Candralamkara:Study,Script Tables, and Fascimile Edition in 2010.

An inscription in same script was also noticed by Bendall on brass image of Buddha from Gaya (Bihar) (Bendall 1890: 77-78). It mentioned the votive gift of the scion of the Brahmaputra congregation. Rajaksha, Yakshapala his son, Ahavamalla (or, son of yakshapalita) (Ravishankar 2016 : 108).

L. A. Waddel noticed at least four images with inscriptions in Bhaikshuki script or arrow headed script (Waddel 1892: 17) at Uren and photographs of two he has published.

D.C. Sircar published three inscriptions from Uren (presently a village in Lakhisarai district, Bihar) and one inscription from Malda Museum. (Sircar 1953: 220- 220). All these four inscriptions found on Buddhist stone sculptures. First it mentioned the doctrine of *Patichchasamuppada* and it is followed by well known Buddhist creed (*Ye dhamma*…). In the first inscription also mentioned name of donor *Pratinava-Srada (vi) tapala* (Sircar 1953:224). A two armed Avalokitesvara image which found from Malda and kept in the Malda Museum (No. BAV -3) dated to 12th cen. AD. It has an inscription on the pedestal in Baikshuki script (Bhattacharya 2001:24). It records the religious gift of the venerable *Buddhapalita* who is a teacher pertaining to the illustrious *Bhakokka* community (Sircar 1953 : 224-26).

A two lines fragmentary inscription on the lower part of a sculptured stone slab near Kajra railway station (presently in Lakhisarai district, Bihar) also noticed by A.N. Lahiri (Sircar 1966 : 84).

Another inscription in same script found on Buddhist image recovered from Kara near Allahabad (U.P). According to inscription, this is the religious gift of the queen *Chandalladevi*, a devout female by worshipper and the wife of the *Ranaka*, the illustrious *Mahipala* (Chakravarti 1938: 37-39).

Another inscription in the same script found on the pedestal of an image of Jambhala dated 10th century A.D. It is found from Ghosikundi, near Kieul(Sircar 1966 : 79-84), presently in Lakhisarai district of Bihar, and kept in Indian museum Kolkata. (Acc. No. 4571/A 23013). The epigraphic record on the Jambhal sculpture is a unique; it may consider largest inscription engraved on any sculpture in Bhaikshuki script. Inscription is engraved in three sections. The translation of the first section is "The illustrious maharaja *Purnavikrama*, son of the illustrious *samyya*, is the lord of the earth" The translation of the second section is "this is the religious gift of the venerable *Jayasena* at *Simhanaga*". Translation of the third section is "It is installed in the month of *Kartika* of 70th year". It records the 70th year belonging to the unknown new era. According to D.C. Sircar(Sircar 1966 : 80-81) it refers the year 70 of *Lakshamanasena samvat*. It is counted from the accession of the Sena king Lakshamana Sena in c. 1179 AD. Therefore 70th year of new era may be c. 1249 AD. Both images, one from Uren and second from Ghosikundi mainly record the Buddhist doctrine of *Pratityasamutpada* followed by Buddhist creed along with the donative epigraph.

A donative inscription in Bhaikshuki script on the base of a small Buddha image released from a chetiya a top Shin-Ma-Taung mountain, Burma; during an earthquake in 1975. It has since been reinstalled in the chetiya and only its eye copy remains available for study. It has been studied by D. C. Sircar (Sircar1977:110-11).

A stone inscription found in debris of cave no. 2 of Bagh (district Dhar, M.P.) in 1991. Interestingly it is mixture of three types of letters, box headed type, and triangular top with the apex of triangle placed upper most similar to Bhaikshuki script and apex of triangle placed down ward. In the inscription Buddhist creed is followed by four great truths (Jai Prakash 2003: 136-139).

Interestingly a brass seal (Acc.No.1695) which is kept in Vaishali museum having the short epigraph in Bhaikshuki script was recently noticed by me and presented a joint paper with S. Krishnamurti, at annual conference of Epigraphical Society of India in 2018 at Kozhikode. The seal is having a rectangular flat base (2.5cms x 0.3cms) bearing the legend inscribed in negative. The height of seal is 2.5 cms. Floral design within square may be seen on its both sides and having a trapezoidal handle in the centre for holding. A perforation in the handle also meant for string. The inscription on brass seal read as "*sarvvarakshaka*" (Pls. 86.1-86.2). It is the only known seal from south Bihar in Bhaikshuki script.

Two copper seals with Bhaikshuki epigraph recently observed by author in Archaeological Museum Vikramshila. First copper seal (Acc.No.1428, height 2.5cm) is having the rectangular base (2.6x0.8cm) with flattish trapezoidal handle bearing the legend of "*salakasya*" in the 12th century AD characters (Pl. 86.3). The second copper seal (Acc.No.1574, 1.7cm diameter and 1.8 cm height) is having conical body with circular flat base and rounded knob with perforation .It is having two line inscription .The first line read as "*Sri Vari*" and second line is "*vasya*" (Pls. 86.4-86.5). It is also belong to characters of 12th century AD. At least seven terracotta sealings with epigraphs in Bhaikshuki script belong to 11th-12th century AD also noticed in reserve collection of Vikramshila Museum. All the sealings bearing the personal names like *saharasa*, *srivara*, *sri*, *puhasa*, *sahara* etc. A terracotta votive stupa found in the excavation from Antichak (Vikramshila mahavihara) also bearing an inscription of six letters in Bhaikshuki script in the characters of 12th century AD (Verma 2011:171).

Recently, Dr.Gautami Bhattacharya, Superintending Archaeologist (I\C), Excavation Branch III, Patna ,Archaeological Survey of India informs that her team has been discovered two Bhaikshuki rock cut inscriptions on the hill (Pl. 86.6) at Uren (district Lakhisarai, Bihar) and Buddhist image inscriptions in same script also discovered at Uren, Majhiyawan (Pl. 86.7) and Pokhrama villages in same district in year 2017-18.Rock cut short epigraph bearing the personal name and image inscription having the Buddhist creed and doctrine of *pratityasamuchchcpada*.

Coming to the close of our study, it may be emphasized that Bhaikshuki is an extinct script originated from Brahmi, exclusively used for Buddhist inscriptions and manuscripts during 10th to12th century AD, invented in Bihar. It is also named as arrow headed script due to the shape of letters, many of which having the triangular arrow at the top or sides. Find spots of this script suggests that it is not confined only in Bihar but West Bengal, U.P., M.P. and region of Nepal, Tibet and Burma also. It is also very remarkable that maximum inscriptions in Bhaikshuki script found in Lakhisarai district of Bihar and Vikramshila mahavihara(modern Antichak, Bhagalpur district of Bihar). If we consider the view of scholars that the identification of Udunpur is as Odantpuri (modern Biharsharif of Bihar), we should have the evidences of this script in Biharsharif or Nalanda region which is still awaited. Only stray examples of this script found outside of Bihar. It may be the result of movement of Buddhist community of Biharsharif region to other places. It is quite possible that Buddhist monks of Odantpuri and Nalanda migrated to Tibet and Nepal along with the manuscripts written in Bhaikshuki script and some of them settled at Vaishali, Vikramshila and Lakhisarai region. There are various questions regarding necessity of invention of this script, limited use, short time span, and its extinction. It is hoped that scholars of Indian palaeography will throw the further light on this unique script by their future researches.

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Pl. 86.1. Inscribed brass seal, Vaishali, Bihar



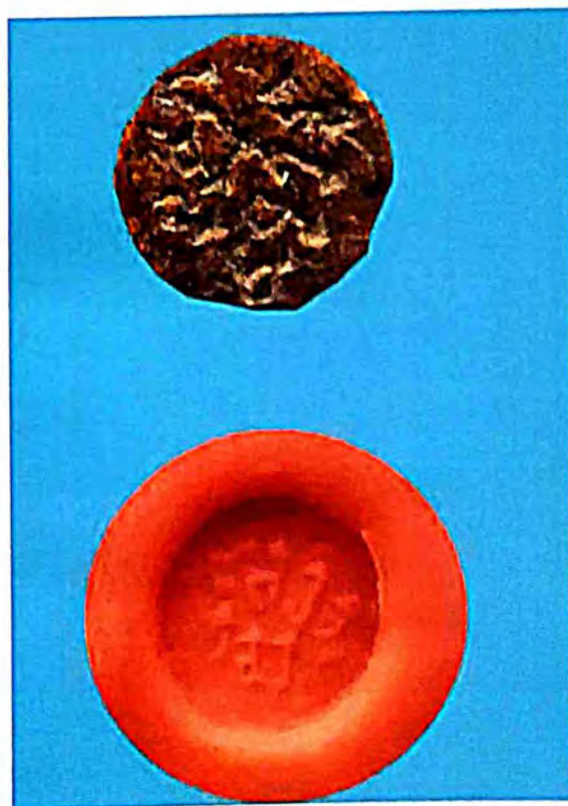
Pl. 86.2. Another view of inscribed brass seal and its impression, Vaishali



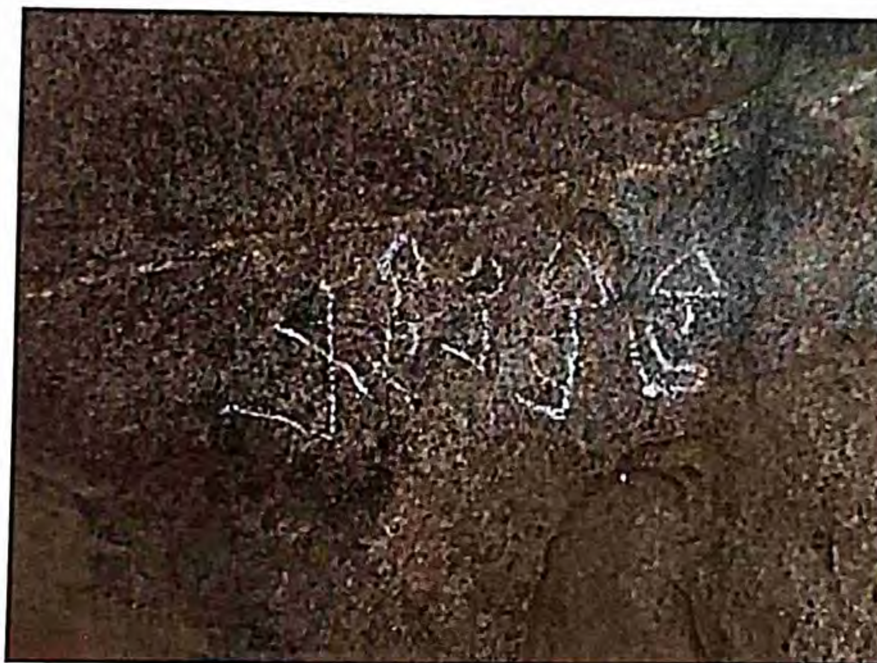
Pl. 86.3. Inscribed copper seal and its impression, Vikramshila



Pl. 86.4. Inscribed copper seal, Vikramshila



Pl. 86.5. Another view of inscribed copper seal and its impression, Vikramshila



Pl. 86.6. Rock inscription, Uren



Pl. 86.7. Inscribed Buddhist image, Majhiyawan

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